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Closing Schools without Killing Communities

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*A school should not be a preparation for life -- a school should be life --
Elbert Hubbard*

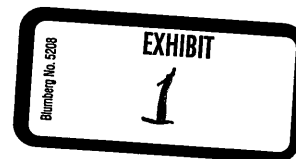
If a school should be life -- the life of those connected with it -- the closing of a school is a death. Reflecting this sentiment, one Alabama school board member recently made this comment in the face of closing a much cherished local school: "It's been a gut-wrenching experience. We've thrown tradition, history, convenience and familiarity down the drain and done so rudely. That ought to be against the law."

Yet school districts all over Alabama -- and the nation -- are struggling with the reality that public schools must operate with a balanced budget. To do otherwise, violates Alabama law:

(a) There shall be a budget system for the public schools of each county and city for the purpose of promoting economy and efficiency in the finances of public schools....

(b) No local board of education or superintendent thereof shall approve any budget for operation of the school for any fiscal year which shall show expenditures in excess of income estimated to be available by the various state and other officials....
(Ala. Code § 16-13-140.)

(a) No local board of education shall spend or obligate itself to spend more money in any fiscal year than the estimate of income available to the board of education for that year, plus balances on hand at the beginning



of the fiscal year.... (Ala. Code § 16-13-144.)

Superintendent's Duty

If the law puts the burden on the board to keep a balanced budget, the superintendent bears an even heavier burden and consequences for not implementing Alabama fiscal laws relating to public schools. In the first place, superintendents have the primary responsibility to "see that the laws relating to the schools ... are carried into effect." (Ala. Code § 16-9-13 and § 16-12-3). But more consequential are the implications of Ala. Code § 16-13-144, which puts the superintendent at risk for misdemeanor punishment if he misrepresents budget information to the state superintendent:

(c) If any local superintendent at any time makes a financial statement to his or her local board of education or to the state superintendent of education in which the superintendent purposely misrepresents the amount of the deficit or obligation outstanding of his or her local board of education, he or she shall be guilty of a misdemeanor and punishable by a fine.... (Ala. Code § 16-13-144.)

Stated otherwise, county and city superintendents must ascertain the financial status of their school systems and take whatever steps are required – including closing of schools – to operate within a balanced budget.

Advanced Planning

While money problems may create an urgent need to consider closing a school or schools, the process used to make that decision should entail much planning over time. The multitude of options and consequences to each must be considered as well as the impact on the entire community. Taxpayers, parents, employees and students – the stakeholders – should be involved to the extent practical.

In addition, the U.S. Justice Department and plaintiffs for those systems operating under federal court orders may, of necessity, be substantially involved to determine the impact on desegregation. Last summer, for example, the Justice Department required the Clay County school board to provide:

- Attendance zone maps;
- Racial composition of students;
- Analysis of class size and student ratio for the previous school year at each school and for each grade in each school;
- Projected student/teacher ratios under the consolidation plan;
- A pupil locator map;
- Bus routes and racial composition of students riding each bus;
- Copies of the board's intersystem transfer policy and information concerning each student allowed to transfer and forbidden to transfer;
- Capital expenditures and construction projects at each school since 1975;
- The Site and Facility Enumeration Report (SAFE) for each school building;

- A description of excess capacity available in each school building;
- The racial composition for faculty, staff and students projected for each school if the closing is approved;
- A detailed explanation of the projected savings for the school system; and
- Any academic or extracurricular benefits that will be achieved for the students.

Obviously, such information requires a great deal of time to compile.

In addition, careful attention must be given to the timeline required by Alabama law regarding personnel actions – transfers and terminations.

In the Beginning

Those who have undertaken the daunting task of deciding whether to close a school and, further, which school to close, offer the following suggestions:

- Start early. To involve and educate the community about funding problems and its consequences, consider a task force as a broad-based resource to gather information and input from all stakeholders. For example, one school system used a task force consisting of an assistant superintendent, two principals, two teachers, two non-certified employees, two students and four parents. From July to September, the task force held meetings and compiled information. Then it made recommendations. The school board designated this process as Phase I. For Phase II, the school board took from October to December to consider the recommendations, meet with principals and parents of the schools targeted for closure, and make its decision whether to close a school (and if so, which one).
- Keep everyone informed. All meetings should not only be open but also well publicized. Teachers and staff should be assured to the extent possible that they will have their jobs, tenure and seniority. In the same manner, students and parents must be reassured that comprehensive planning will be undertaken to assure a smooth transition for course requirements, extracurricular activities and participation, and general orientation in the new setting. Empathetic planning to address the emotional and social needs of students and staff must be undertaken.

After the Decision

- Meet and listen. Meetings with parents and students in the different parts of the school system to discuss the new arrangement are vitally important and should cover integrating the academic program from one school to the next and student participation in activities and leadership roles. Also offer opportunities through open house sessions to familiarize everyone with the new setting. Set up ample time and opportunities to address questions and concerns from parents and students.
- Maintain the school history. It is also important to maintain the history and memorabilia (i.e., trophies, mascots, pictures, etc.) of the closing school. Historic and sentimental items like plaques and flags should be appropriately placed in the receiving school if

possible. Parents and former students will want to visit and take pictures of the closing school. This should be encouraged and facilitated and photo opportunities arranged.

Suggested Policy

School districts may want to adopt a policy reflecting how the board will proceed if a school closing may have to be considered. Having a policy setting forth what will be done may help to minimize some community apprehension. What follows is an example of a school closing policy. Each school system would want to adopt a policy designed to meet its unique needs and requirements.

Sample Policy:

As population matures or shifts within the school district, certain school buildings may no longer be needed for their original purpose and should be put to use to benefit the school system or public in other ways. In determining which facility is to be retired for regular school purposes, the board shall be guided by this combination of factors:

1. Educational flexibility. Which school building is least adaptable for housing a modern and flexible educational program?
2. Neighborhood. Which school building is most isolated in terms of proximity to the residences of students?
3. Cost. Which school building represents the highest cost in terms of upkeep and maintenance?

The board shall invite the viewpoints of parents and staff in making its decision.

If the board determines to close a school, it shall first consider other uses that the school system might make of the building. Then it shall consider, in order, its sale to the municipality, to nonprofit educational and civic organizations, or to private entrepreneurs.

The historic value of any building also shall be considered by the board. In such cases, it may take special action to provide for its preservation.

Conclusion

If school closings may be required, at the earliest possible time the superintendent and board should meet with state Superintendent Dr. Ed Richardson and/or his staff for input and assistance. The information, experience and guidance available through the state Board of Education has been invaluable school districts as they cope with this wrenching experience.

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